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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENT MINISTER RAHHAL WELCOMES U.S.
ASSISTANCE FOR UNDERFUNDED MINISTRY

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Water management, reforestation and solid waste management were the Environment Ministry's key priorities, new Environment Minister Mohammed Rahhal told the Ambassador on January 28. Rahhal pledged continued cooperation with USAID reforestation programs and asked for assistance in removing solid waste from the 2006 oil spill clean-up off Lebanon's shores. He would emphasize alternative energy moving forward, Rahhal said, and he described a proposal to provide financial incentives for alternative energy vehicles. Rahhal also broached obtaining U.S.-made hybrid vehicles for ministry employees to raise environmental awareness. We propose pursuing a Rahhal visit to the United States, considering a U.S. Trade and Development Agency (TDA) feasibility study on alternative energy, and working with USDOC-FCS on hybrid vehicle procurement. End summary.

WATER TOP PRIORITY

¶2. (C) Water management and sanitation are two of his main priorities, Rahhal told the Ambassador in a January 28 courtesy call. During negotiations over the ministerial statement, Rahhal pointed out, Prime Minister Saad Hariri emphasized clean-up of the Litani River, which passes through 50% of rural villages and irrigates up to 70% of fertile land. Rahhal, who just completed a three-year "master plan" for the ministry, noted that his ministry is a player in preventing pollution, and he underscored the importance of working with the United States to improve water sanitation. (Note: The lead players in the water sector are the Ministry of Energy and Water and the four regional water authorities. End note.) The Ambassador noted the success of USAID-funded waste water treatment plants in the West Biqa' and Chouf regions.

MINISTRY WELCOMES USAID REFORESTATION EFFORTS

¶3. (C) Reforestation is another ministry priority, Rahhal noted, and the Ambassador described the extensive U.S. activities in this area. With Department of Defense Humanitarian Assistance funding, the Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers just completed a fire station in Ehmej (Jbeil) the Ambassador reported. In addition, USAID -- in conjunction with the United States Forest Service (USFS) -- had sponsored wilderness fire origin investigation training via a local NGO partner. As part of its new five-year strategy, USAID plans to support reforestation efforts that provide short-term jobs in rural areas, the Ambassador continued, and USAID has tentatively identified funding for that purpose. One proposed USFS project, she explained, would teach a more

efficient tree planting method that would increase the rate of reforestation, boost short-term job growth, and emphasize sustainability. Rahhal expressed enthusiasm about the plans and admitted that previous planting efforts had fallen short because of lack of follow-on; he wanted all future reforestation contracts to include a seven-year maintenance plan.

SOLID WASTE CONCERNS BECOMING URGENT

¶4. (C) Because the Naameh waste treatment plant has almost reached capacity, solid waste management is becoming increasingly important, Rahhal said. The ministry plans to issue new tenders, he said, after cabinet approval of a national solid waste strategy that the ministry has yet to submit. Rahhal expressed interest in visiting sites in the U.S. using "waste-to-energy" technology in addition to talking to experts on the field. PM Hariri plans to visit similar alternative energy sites in Germany, Rahhal noted, and a TDA feasibility study on the topic would be well received in Lebanon. (Note: TDA has been active in Lebanon, completing 14 feasibility studies in various sectors since ¶1992. End note.)

¶5. (C) Rahhal requested that the U.S. help remove stored waste from the USAID-assisted 2006 coastal oil spill clean-up. The waste -- divided into polluted sand, debris, and oil -- was stored in sealed containers in the north, Zahrani, and Jiyeh, Rahhal said, but the ministry needs international assistance to dispose of the oil-covered solid waste. (Note: USAID closed out this project in February 2009 after completing its pledged portion of the oil spill

clean-up activities; this is the first time we have heard of this additional request. There are no FY-10 or FY-11 USAID funds designated for additional activities in this area. Greek and Italian reconstruction funding in this sector has also ended. End note.)

A MARGINALIZED MINISTRY

¶6. (C) Describing the weaknesses of his ministry, Rahhal explained that many ministries have overlapping mandates regarding the environment, and his ministry is unable to enforce its will because it is too "young" and lacks broad prerogatives. The ministry, with a staff of only 53, also lacks human and financial resources, he said. Nonetheless, Rahhal underscored, the environment is important to PM Hariri, who has placed environmental issues on the cabinet agenda in four of six cabinet sessions, and Rahhal expected significant progress from his ministry. After completing a series of studies on solid waste, the Litani River, dam sites and quarries, Rahhal plans to meet with international donors to seek funding to develop a "comprehensive" environment strategy. Rahhal also laid out his intention for the ministry to play a "coordinating" role in de-conflicting international funding to the environmental sector.

PROMOTING HYBRID VEHICLES

¶7. (C) Rahhal proposed that companies producing hybrid vehicles, such as Ford Motors, provide hybrid cars for environment ministry employees to raise public awareness and garner positive advertising. According to Rahhal, the finance ministry has secured funding to conduct a feasibility study on replacing Lebanon's taxi fleet -- totaling approximately 200,000 cars, he said -- with hybrids. Rahhal also outlined his idea for establishing an "environment fund" that would provide financial incentives for the purchase of hybrid cars and other "environmentally friendly" energy vehicles. In addition, Rahhal proposed coordinating with the ministry of public works to create an artificial reef off Lebanon's coast using scrap buses. Similar projects using

old trains have succeeded in the U.S., Rahhal said, and he expressed interest in learning more about such schemes.

18. (C) Comment: As a young, first-time minister, Rahhal displayed his activist background in his first meeting with the Ambassador. Because he is a creative and willing partner for U.S. initiatives, we propose pursuing a U.S. visit for the minister, with stops at the Environmental Protection Agency and relevant academic and private institutions to discuss waste-to-energy systems and other alternative energy prospects. Rahhal was keen on a TDA solid waste feasibility study, and we will seek input from TDA on next steps. We will also work with the Department of Commerce (FCS) to pursue Rahhal's hybrid vehicle proposals for the taxi fleet and the Ministry.

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